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# Stephen King's *The Dark Tower* and the Postmodern Serial

Jessica Waller

A departmental senior thesis submitted to the Department of English at  
Trinity University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation  
with departmental honors.

April 2, 2008

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### ***The Dark Tower***

In 2003, the year that the final chapters of his seven-volume work *The Dark Tower* were published, Stephen King wrote that in 1970, when he first began the tale at age twenty-two, “what [he] wanted to write was a novel that contained Tolkien’s sense of quest and magic but set against [Sergio Leone’s] almost absurdly majestic Western backdrop” (*Gunslinger* 2003, xv). King combined elements of Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* and Arthurian legend, such as the righteous quest to save mankind from certain destruction, with a hero that was plucked directly from Sergio Leone’s “Man With No Name” trilogy: a tough, independent, battle-hardened cowboy who is quick with a gun and slow with moral judgment. This combination of Tolkien’s definite lines of right and wrong with Leone’s anti-hero led King to write a tale that followed few of the rules of the traditional quest story. The work took him over thirty years to write, beginning before the novelist had published a line and ending with him as a bestselling author and pop-culture icon. As the work developed, King’s purposes changed and he turned the traditional quest story on its head, combining a form with roots in Victorian serial publication with a postmodern fascination with pop culture and intertextuality. By combining these two previously unconnected forms, King’s *Dark Tower* defies traditional categorization and leads to a new synthesis of ideas: the Postmodern Serial.

The work itself began as the vague and meandering quest of Roland, the last gunslinger of Gilead, who was on a quest to first find the Man in Black, who would set him on the road to the Dark Tower, his ultimate quest. Eventually, this world came to envelop all other worlds, including that of the writer and his readers:

Roland’s story is my Jupiter—a planet that dwarfs all the others (at least from my own perspective), a place of strange atmosphere, crazy landscape, and savage gravitational

pull. Dwarfs the others, did I say? I think there's more to it than that, actually. I am coming to understand that Roland's world (or worlds) actually contains all the others of my making (*Wizard and Glass* 671).

Though he could not have known it when he began his quest story, Stephen King was embarking on a tale that would come to dominate all other aspects of his writing life; one that was at once difficult to return to and impossible to avoid, and that came to be a revisioning of both the influences from which King worked and, to a lesser degree, his own novels and characters that found their way into his tale.

King began the *Dark Tower* novels as a reworking of Robert Browning's quest poem "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came" as an epic for an audience who may not have had any knowledge of the Browning poem but who was aware of the greater quest tradition of early romances and Arthurian legend. The first installment is short, a tale that asks more questions than it answers, introduces the reader to Roland and his world, and establishes that there are links between this strange waste land and the world of New York, when the boy Jake appears in a way station and joins the gunslinger's quest. The second installment begins to answer questions, filling in more details of Roland's life and present quest, presenting him with a band of companions, and expanding the world given in the opening volume. Here the reader is at least aware of movement: the band of travelers finds the Path of the Beam—an invisible force (at least to one who doesn't know to look for it) that holds up the Tower and will inevitably lead to it—and the quest begins in earnest. At this point, King seemingly commits himself to a plan of action, or at least a plan of process. He will rewrite himself almost constantly throughout the work, and will spend hundreds of pages with his characters wandering in a waste land as he tries to decide exactly what is going to happen to them, and what he as a writer is trying to

accomplish. This sense of writing into the void, without a sense of purpose, is an element of King's series that is puzzling, yet also fruitful for King. Without knowing the direction his characters and plot will take, King allows himself to make mistakes and change his course at will. Rather than stop to plan out his series and then publish all seven volumes in a short time frame, King chooses to plunge ahead with no sense of the shape or scope of his project.

In the introduction to the revised and expanded version of the first installment, published right before the final three installments came to print, King claims that he

wanted to write not just a *long* book, but *the longest popular novel in history*. I did not succeed in doing that, but I feel I had a decent rip; *The Dark Tower*, volumes one through seven, really comprise a single tale, and the first four volumes run to just over two thousand pages in paperback. The final three volumes run another twenty-five hundred in manuscript. I'm not trying to imply here that length has anything whatsoever to do with quality; I'm just saying that I wanted to write an epic, and in some ways, I succeeded.

(*Gunslinger* 2003 xvi)

Throughout the over four thousand pages of his epic, King's style and story evolve in fascinating and sometimes strange ways. *The Gunslinger*, for example, is a meandering tale told in reverse. King begins with his gunslinger chasing the Man in Black across the desert, and from there Roland goes back in his mind to his meeting with a strange farmer in the last settlement he passed. Then King moves back further, with Roland telling the man he meets of the destruction of the city of Tull, in which Roland kills every inhabitant because of a trap left there for him by the Man in Black and the religious zealot Sylvia Pittston. King begins the second volume, *The Drawing of the Three*, with immediate action and the continuous forward motion. He picks up his tale a few hours after the end of *The Gunslinger*, with Roland sitting on the beach of the

Western Sea in a meditative trance. Almost immediately, the gunslinger is attacked by “lobstrocities,” and brought out of his meditation by having his thumb and index finger bitten off of his right hand. This violent action marks the end of King’s own meditative prose style from the first volume: as Roland is maimed and forced into action, King’s tale is propelled out of thought and into action. Gone is his tendency to launch into flowered descriptions and vague remembrances of the past from Roland. Over ten years older than he was when he began *The Gunslinger*, King’s style becomes very direct and action-driven, as opposed to the almost cerebral quality of the first volume. The reader is led out of Roland’s mind and voice, practically the only voice that is heard in *The Gunslinger*, and into a world of many voices and worlds, most notably foul-mouthed Eddie Dean and schizophrenic Detta Walker/Odetta Holmes.

Over the course of the seven volumes, Roland’s world becomes a portal into other worlds and eventually an all-encompassing universe that contains not only Roland and his companions but characters from other King novels, such as Father Callahan of ‘*Salem’s Lot* and Ted Brautigan of *Hearts in Atlantis*. Eventually Stephen King himself appears in the series as a character, and, by extension, the reader is drawn in as an inhabitant of one of the worlds that King writes and Roland visits. His epic encompasses versions of New York from every decade between 1960 and 2000, bringing in several generations of readers with a world they could readily identify. King collapses his sources, sometimes aligning T.S. Eliot with characters from popular film or having the character Eddie, a reformed heroin addict from New York City in the 1980s, spout lines of Shakespeare between lines of expletives and angst. In this way, King gives old subject matter new life and a new audience: the story denies a specific genre by combining elements of many different genres, linking and collapsing the worlds of fantasy, western, and epic quest.

## The Dark Tower and Serial Publication

The very mode of publication of *The Dark Tower* presents a strange flattening of form and presents the main difficulty in categorizing the work into a genre. King set out to write an epic, but in no way could he have been prepared for just how epic—in size and time frame—his work would be once it was concluded. He draws significantly on the most popular form of the Victorian period: serialization. As with the serial authors of the nineteenth century, King was writing subsequent volumes as he was publishing each installment, and at the outset of the first, he had no idea where his project would lead him or what was going to occur, other than the fact that Roland must at some point meet the Man in Black, and perhaps, if found worthy, reach his Tower. Rather than writing one novel that contained the entire story, King's work carried into seven volumes, most with a span of several years between them, and one span in which he was nearly killed in a car accident. It is difficult to call these seven volumes a "series," but they do not easily fit under the umbrella of "serial" publication, either.

*The Gunslinger* was first published in serial format as five installments in *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction* between 1978 and 1981. It appeared in novel format the next year. The other six volumes were all published only in novel format, but the work as a whole shares many similarities with Victorian serial publication. Hughes and Lund define the serial as "a continuing story over an extended time with enforced interruptions" (1). The Victorian

images for human life, in fact, often stressed length more than shortness. And many Victorian narratives underscored the opportunities along life's path rather than its limited options: a series of recognized steps (not without danger, to be sure) marked the individual's (and the group's) long climb from infancy through maturity, and on to an adulthood marked more by accomplishment than failure. (1)

As with Victorian serials, this destination was the ultimate goal of the series. All events, all descriptions, led to this final point. Writers working under the strict codes of serial publication may not have known from the outset what would happen in their novels, but they knew that there would be a definite ending point, a goal to be reached by the characters by the end of the novel.

Hughes and Lund continue by saying that

the serial confuted the ‘catastrophic’ notion of artistic inspiration, a kind of gigantic creative shudder that results in a single aesthetic product. The serial occurred gradually, not suddenly, and it was premised on such uniform principles that a month’s hiatus in the plot was not fatal to the work’s underlying coherence or continuous growth. (7)

Charles Dickens’ *Bleak House* embodies this definition of the serial as a gradually unfolding work that became a kind of companion for the reader. Dickens’ serial, published in monthly installments between March of 1852 and September of 1853, begins with a very cinematic focusing shot:

London. Michaelmas Term lately over, and the Lord Chancellor sitting in Lincoln’s Inn Hall. Implacable November weather. As much mud in the streets, as if the waters had but newly retired from the face of the earth,... . Smoke lowering down from chimney-pots, making a soft black drizzle, with flakes of soot in it as big as full grown snow-flakes—gone into mourning, one might imagine, for the death of the sun. (5)

This clipped style of quickly shifting images allows Dickens to take stock of the situation in all of London, beginning very broadly and focusing slowly onto the case of Jarndyce and Jarndyce and the book’s occasional narrator, Esther Summerson. Over the course of the twenty installments, Dickens introduces an enormous cast of characters, all of whom will be tied



together in a vast web that he must untangle as his plot unfolds and reaches its ultimate conclusion.

The idea of a slow, unfolding story that works gently over time into conclusions illuminates a reading of Stephen King's work, in its ambling opening volumes and the writer's own search for plot and movement in his own work. Yet *The Dark Tower* has obvious points of contrast with the serial form: there are no enforced interruptions. *The Dark Tower* was not constrained by any time or publication limits besides those imposed by the author himself. This work cannot truly be called a serial, because it did not occur as individual installments in a single, large narrative, despite King's own intimation that he viewed all of the novels as interwoven parts of one longer story. The novels are just that: individual novels that work together toward one common conclusion. They have been called a series, yet this definition has its own set of difficulties.

### **Serial and Series**

The Victorian series has been called "ultimately indistinguishable" from the serial novel (Langbauer 8). The definition, "in the strictest sense," of a series is a group of novels, or narratives, that each "[end] not with a crisis, a cliffhanger, but with a climax resolved through its denouement into regular closure, a closure which is then breached at the start of the next story" (Langbauer 8). This sense of closure differs from the end of a serial installment, where there is very often some kind of cliffhanger that helps to insure that readers will again pick up the magazine and read the next month's installment. A similar device is found in King's work. Though his work is published into seven discrete novels, which can all be purchased and read separately, the work makes little sense and reaches no true conclusion unless it is all read together. Full meaning is gained only when one works through the entire series.

The idea of *The Dark Tower* as merely a series of discrete novels is problematic, however. Though each novel deals with different events, a different story, the same characters and ideals are contained in each. Langbauer's interpretation of the series claims that the "motive force is to keep itself going. In this reading as well, the series becomes just another mechanism for self-continuation; it exemplifies the self-sustaining, self-generating dynamic of power" (12). King's work definitely "[keeps] itself going," often without a clear sense of purpose or destination. In the first two volumes especially Roland and the reader travel no closer physically to the Tower than they are at the beginning of *The Gunslinger*. As King writes, however, he gains momentum and purpose, generating his own universe and history. Langbauer continues with the idea that the sheer "expansiveness of the series allows it to become a kind of cultural repository" that contains "cultural dilemma" and fantasy, and acts as a "political unconscious" to the readers (14). The most common theme of the Victorian novel was domestic life. Readers spoke about the characters as if they were real people, and the plots of these serialized novels became a part of the very unconsciousness of society, imprinting their stories on the collective Victorian mind. King's series works in a similar manner: the author is a pop-culture savings bank, and his inclusion of popular American song, fiction, place, and historical references transform *The Dark Tower* into a cultural repository similar to the Victorian series. Over the course of its seven volumes, *The Dark Tower* becomes America's cultural consciousness: a history of the Civil Rights Movement from the eyes of a black woman, a take on 1980s drug culture from the eyes of an addict, a criticism of American capitalism through one fictional corporation run by the Crimson King and his vampire minions.

One particular aspect of Langbauer's look at the Victorian series that also applies to King's series is her idea of the "series as *process*, as history in the sense of going on," and "a

mode of narrative correction” (35; 38). These ideas are best exemplified in W.M. Thackeray, whose “demystification of history may serve to mystify something else: *his* own “greatness” within literary history. Thackeray’s view of history might cut others down to size, but it does so by subjecting them to his measure” (39). Thackeray “literally *creates* his own literary history” (Langbauer 39). *The Dark Tower* can be expressed in this way: a revisioning of literary and cultural history that leads up to itself, that locates itself in literature and in culture, and that moves strangely in and out of time, correcting itself as it goes.

### **Synthesis of Serial and Series**

Because *The Dark Tower* is not one single novel in parts that have “enforced interruptions,” it is not a serial. Because it is, in fact, one long story extended into seven volumes and not merely extensions of a particular setting or set of characters with new plots and stories, it is also not a series. King’s work collapses these two forms: the slow, unfolding nature of the serial and the sheer expansiveness and historical revisioning of the series.

The theorization of *The Dark Tower* is not as simple as a synthesis of series and serial form. It could be said that Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* series operates with a similar combination of the serial and series forms. Though each installment of Tolkien’s work is a distinct novel, the same story is continued through all three, and they must all be read consecutively in order to reach a conclusion. Tolkien’s series remains true to the goals appointed in the first novel, however, and the readers know from the beginning of the Fellowship’s quest which characters stand on the right side and which do not. In the end, the good characters are rewarded and the evil are punished. These clear distinctions of good and evil and a sense of poetic justice, which Tolkien shares with Victorian works, do not hold in King’s work. As noted above, nineteenth-century novels worked toward one destination, toward a particular goal. King’s series begins this

way, but the Tower is deceptive in its role as destination and symbol. The publication forms of the nineteenth century helped to reinforce “dominant Victorian ideology, uniformitarian rather than catastrophic principles, models of steady, continuous, consistent development rather than abrupt, cataclysmic, revolutionary change” (Hughes and Lund 6). In this way, serialization reinforced the conservative values of nineteenth-century Victorian society, creating a cultural status quo to match the political and economic ideologies of the day. Despite his status as a powerful icon of American popular culture, it cannot really be said that King’s series works to maintain any form of cultural status quo. *The Dark Tower* depends on archetypal characters and symbols, traditional quest plots and a publication form based on upholding dominant ideologies, but King uses these elements to pull the rug out from under his readers. He gives the reader a form with which they are familiar and for which they have certain expectations, and then he denies them a traditional ending and his plot becomes anything but archetypal.

The Victorian serial was characterized by the movement of plot—all events led to one specific ending point where the good were rewarded and the evil were punished. Plots were often complicated, involving many seemingly unrelated story lines that all came together, sometimes inexplicably, in the end for a perfectly wrapped-up ending. Those who violated cultural norms and political values were left destitute, and the protagonist, earlier experiencing all manner of trials, was finally left contented and rewarded for their perseverance: “Dickens’ audience knew they were being invited to join in a nineteen-month experience and were ready from the start to admire characters who endure many hardships, steadfastly pursue distant dreams, and are finally (but only finally) rewarded” (Hughes and Lund 31). The goal of many Victorian serials was, in fact, the “domestication of society,” and the reinforcement of the ideologies of home, history, and poetic justice (Hughes and Lund 55).

*The Dark Tower* works on quite different terms: it begins with a quest for a tower that begs to be a symbol, a destination in the traditional sense, but quickly becomes something that violates expectation. In the end, the Tower becomes a symbol for nothing. It becomes the repetition of Hell for Roland, who must begin his quest anew each time he reaches the room at the top of the Tower with no memory that he has done it all before. In King's series, there are radical disjunctures between the worlds, juxtapositions of cultures, languages, ideologies, and times; and traditional conservative values are not reinforced, but transformed. Roland is not the questing knight rewarded for his efforts at the end of a long quest, but a knight errant who travels through thousands of years and worlds both familiar to the reader and completely foreign, and sacrifices everything and everyone he loves in order to reach his Tower, which is, in fact, nothing more than a gateway to another round of his quest.

### **Postmodernism**

The disjuncture of worlds in King's series reflects Frederic Jameson's definition of the postmodern as "an attempt to think the present historically in an age that has forgotten how to think historically in the first place" (ix). Jameson argues that the postmodern world is one where "culture has become a product in its own right; the market has become a substitute for itself and fully as much a commodity as any of the items it includes within itself.... Postmodernism is the consumption of sheer commodification as a process" (x). These ideas followed the breakdown of high modernism, which strove for autonomy and a new means of seeing the world, and postmodernism sought to destroy these lofty artistic views by combining high and low reference with no distinction or hierarchy of values. According to Jameson, art is meant to upset and defy aesthetic convention, and once something is called beautiful it is domesticated and no longer has

cultural power. Postmodernism, then, is a way of disrupting the art system, and is reflective of the new commodity culture of what Jameson calls “late capitalism” :

The postmodernisms have, in fact, been fascinated precisely by this whole “degraded” landscape of schlock and kitsch, of TV series and *Reader’s Digest* culture, of advertising and motels, of the late show and the grade-B Hollywood film, of so-called paraliterature with its airport paperback categories of the gothic and the romance, the popular biography, the murder mystery, and the science fiction or fantasy novel: materials they no longer simple “quote,” as a Joyce or a Mahler might have done, but incorporate into their very substance. (3)

Stephen King’s series is all of these things: gothic, romance, mystery, science fiction and fantasy. It is also a perfect example of a blending of ideals and tastes, where Arthurian romance is somehow communicated through a 1980s New Yorker who is a recovering heroin addict and is in love with a legless black woman from the 1960s. The shuffling and reshuffling of worlds that King employs so often reflects the postmodernist “reshuffling of canonical feelings and values” that Jameson discusses (xiv). In order to create a new system, there must be a “profound collective self-transformation, a reworking and rewriting of an older system” (xiv).

In order to rewrite the older system, there must be a new version of history. Just as Thackeray rewrote literary history in his serial novels so that his own writing was the point to which all things led, King uses a postmodern reshuffling of values and combination of high and low reference in order to rewrite literary history so that it leads, ultimately, to *The Dark Tower*. Rather than embracing the Victorian view of history as a rhythm of “progress and pause” in which “there is a fixed, linear order to time and progress” where even “cataclysmic changes...are part of a steady forward movement” (Hughes and Lund 63, 72), *The Dark Tower* has no stable

sense of time or linear progression. The first novel is told in reverse, the action of the second and third novels leads readers no closer to a clear understanding of the Tower, and the fourth novel is a lengthy digression into Roland's past that illuminates the fact that the entire quest is based on a vision in a glass ball that may or may not have any basis in reality.

Stephen King's work rewrites the entire world, and by the end of the final novel, *The Dark Tower* is history: the quest is an almost encyclopedic mashing together of everything, culminating in the moment of recognition that history always repeats itself. Roland's quest is the result of his own fatal lack of imagination that leads him to choose the Tower over love and sacrifice everyone who loves him to his Tower. This choice leads him to relive his miserable quest over and over again into infinity. The worlds of Stephen King's novels envelop our world, and his story includes multiple histories for our world and even contains himself as a character and the "writer" who controls the fates of his characters by his writing the story that the reader is reading. This metafictional element of *The Dark Tower* reflects Jameson's discussion of the postmodern historical novel, in which there is an attempt to "establish an explicit narrative link between the reader's and the writer's present and the older historical reality that is the subject of the work" (21).

*The Dark Tower* appears as a traditional quest story, published in a reformed version of serialization, and quickly becomes a world of chaos and revision where the ultimate goal is the quest itself. *The Dark Tower* is a journey, not a destination. The quest culminates not in the traditional nineteenth-century ending of comfort and reinforcement of conservative value, but in repetition: a literary feedback loop that ends where it began. Roland does reach his tower, leading the reader to assume that the quest is complete. There is no conclusion, however, and no catharsis for the supposed hero. He is not rewarded for his efforts, but sent back to the beginning,

to endure his wrongs over again and again. King's series becomes the strange conflation of a form based entirely on maintaining conservative values and a theoretical concept based on the destruction of all values. *The Dark Tower* sets the reader up: they are given a traditional quest story with a hero, a destination, and a band of assisting questers. We quickly get off track, though, as our hero becomes an anti-hero that terrifies even the novelist, and the Tower becomes a symbol for nothing.

### **The Postmodern Serial**

King has rewritten and redefined serialization through a postmodern lens. The Postmodern Serial, then, is defined by the collapsing of worlds and sources and the sense of writing into the void. In *The Dark Tower*, King writes without knowing where the quest will lead him, and one effect of his writing into the void is a rewriting of the Christian void of creation. Three times in the work, King presents a vision of the universe and a story of creation. Each time the story is different, reflecting King's rewriting of himself and his changing notions of the Tower and quest.

At the end of *The Gunslinger*, The Man in Black gives Roland a vision of the universe. Roland describes his vision as “[w]hite light,...[a]nd then—a blade of grass. One single blade of grass that filled everything” (220). The Man in Black attempts to explain the universe to Roland, saying that it is “the Great All, and offers a paradox too great for the finite mind to grasp” (220). The Man in Black tells Roland that the point of it all is a matter of size:

The greatest mystery the universe offers is not life but size. Size encompasses life, and the Tower encompasses size. The child, who is most at home with wonder, says: Daddy, what is above the sky? And the father says: The darkness of space. The child:



What is beyond space? The father: The galaxy. The child: Beyond the galaxy? The father: Another galaxy. The child: Beyond the other galaxies? The father: No one knows.

You see? Size defeats us. (221)

Through his talk with Roland, the Man in Black rewrites the story of the creation of the universe. It is essentially a retelling of the biblical account of creation, only this version contains many worlds, all of which center around the Dark Tower. King begins this section with biblical echoes, writing that “The universe was void. Nothing moved. Nothing was,” and ending with

light, crashing in on [Roland] like a hammer, a great and primordial light. In it, consciousness perished – but before it did, the gunslinger saw something of cosmic importance. He clutched it with agonized effort and sought himself. He fled the insanity the knowledge implied and so came back to himself. (*Gunslinger* 1988, 204)

Yet before he comes back to himself, Roland is given a chance to give up the Tower. When he begs to be shown no more of the cosmic vision he is hurtled through, Walter gives Roland a chance to save his soul from his quest:

The voice of the man in black whispered silkily in his ear: “Then renege. Cast away all thoughts of the Tower. Go your way, gunslinger, and save your soul.”

He gathered himself. Shaken and alone, enwrapt in the darkness, terrified of an ultimate meaning rushing at him, he gathered himself and uttered the final, flashing imperative:

“*NO! NEVER!*”

“*THEN LET THERE BE LIGHT!*” (*Gunslinger* 1988, 204)

Roland’s refusal to give up his quest for the Tower brings him back to himself, back to the Golgotha where he sits with the Man in Black. In this first version of a creation story, King

focuses mainly on those things mentioned in the biblical creation: light, plants, land, man. At this point, King himself does not know where Roland is going, why he is going, or even what exactly the Dark Tower is. As he writes, King refines his vision of the Tower and of Roland's quest, and his creation myth recurs frequently, changing and reshaping with each retelling.

In *Wizard and Glass*, book four of *The Dark Tower*, King gives Roland's history before his quest began, and rewrites Roland's vision of the universe, this time seen through the Wizard's Glass. This pink glass ball, much like Tolkien's One Ring, has a great power over any who come in contact with it, and Roland is immediately entranced. A voice calls Roland's name and shows him things that are happening in the world around him, but then addresses him directly, giving him a vision of the fabled Dark Tower:

“Light! Let there be light!” ...

“Gunslinger, look—look there.”

*Yes, there it is, a dusty gray-black pillar rearing on the horizon: the Dark Tower, the place where all Beams, all lines of force, converge. In its spiraling windows he sees fitful electric blue fire and hears the cries of all those pent within; he senses both the strength of the place and the wrongness of it. (Wizard and Glass 572)*

The gunslinger vows to enter the tower and “conquer the wrongness” within it, but then the voice warns him, saying “You will kill everything and everyone you love, ... and still the Tower will be pent shut against you” (*Wizard and Glass* 573). As he did in *The Gunslinger*, Roland refuses to let go of his newly claimed quest, shouting that the Tower “will not stand” against him, and the voice damns him: “Then die” (573). Roland is “hurled at the gray-black stone flank of the Tower, to be smashed there like a bug against a rock. But before that can happen” (573) he is released from the grasp of the ball, but he is changed to his friends. At that moment, the

gunslinger begins the self-appointed task that will destroy everything around him. Though in the chronology of the story this vision happens before Roland's palaver with Walter in *The Gunslinger*, this version of the Tower and creation myth was written almost two decades later. Young Roland's decision to begin his quest for the Tower in *Wizard and Glass* is based on a far different assumption than is his pursuit of the Man in Black in order to gain knowledge of the Tower in *The Gunslinger*. Though King revised the first volume before the final three were published, his creation myth is virtually untouched, and the discrepancies in the descriptions of the Tower and Roland's quest are left intact, as if King is acknowledging that he is writing into the void.

One final version of the initial creation myth is found in the seventh volume, *The Dark Tower*, though in this volume the vision of the Tower is no longer a true creation myth. At this point, there are no doubts in King's mind regarding the Tower or Roland's quest. The Tower is not, as it had been in the past, a destination, but a symbol for the quest itself. Roland is the Tower. When he finally does reach it, it is not pent shut against him as Walter and the Wizard's Glass prophesied, but rather welcomes him. The door slams behind him and he begins to climb the stairs. He sees his life told through every level of the Tower, each floor holding a different artifact from his life:

Floor by floor and tale by tale (not to mention death by death), the rising rooms of the Dark Tower recounted Roland Deschain's life and quest. ...

*This is a place of death, he thought, and not just here. All these rooms. Every floor.*

Yes, gunslinger, whispered the Voice of the Tower. *But only because your life has made it so.* (*The Dark Tower* 825)

When at last he reaches the room at the top and places his hand on the doorknob, he realizes that he has done it all before. The door opens onto the desert where the reader first encountered Roland, and he is swept back, not to the beginning of his quest that King describes in the fourth volume, but to the beginning of King's quest: the opening of *The Gunslinger*. As soon as he is through the door, he begins to forget the entirety of his journey. With each retelling of Roland's vision of the universe and the Tower King becomes more specific, adding details that hint at the cyclical nature of Roland's quest. In the original version of *The Gunslinger*, King's, and by extension, Roland's vision of the Dark Tower is vague. Both claim not to know exactly what the Tower is, simply that it must be reached. As he writes, King discovers more and more of Roland's world, mind, and quest. In the end, the Tower is not an end to but the resumption of a quest, and the final novel ends with the first sentence of *The Gunslinger*, written over thirty years earlier: "The man in black fled across the desert, and the gunslinger followed."

Along the way, King incorporates elements of high and low reference, ranging from Shakespeare and T.S. Eliot to the Rolling Stones and Z.Z. Top. There is no sense of artistic hierarchy among these references for King, who flattens them all together, in a sense subverting them and bringing them all into himself as a means to create his own literary persona and rewrite literary history for himself.

### **Writing into the Void**

Rather than stop to plan, King merely writes his way through the story with no sense of what his characters will do or where their actions will take them, seeking, as Tony Magistrale notes, "a vision he neither understands nor precisely knows where or how to pursue" (142). This sense of writing without knowing is a vital characteristic of King's postmodern serial: it allows

the reader to fully grasp that this is a universe where all worlds are collapsing and falling into one another, and the novels themselves become the product of that collapse.

After the original publication of *The Gunslinger* in 1982, it took King seven years to complete *The Drawing of the Three*. In the second installment, Roland is no closer to his Tower than he was in the first installment, and King no closer to knowing what that Tower actually is: “At the close of the first volume Roland is perhaps no closer physically to the Dark Tower than when he began his quest in the desert. ...And most important, Roland has opened himself to the potential for a sustaining unity that ties together the unique elements of a universe” (Magistrale 144). The next three novels are almost a digression from the actual quest: the second novel deals almost exclusively with Roland entering three different versions of New York to draw his new band of companions to him and to save the boy Jake from being killed by Jack Mort, the event that brought Jake to the Way Station in the first book. In so doing, Roland creates a paradox: by saving Jake’s life in New York, Jake never existed in Roland’s world, but both of them remember meeting one another. This paradox sets up the first half of the third book, aptly titled *The Waste Lands*. In this novel, the reader wanders with King’s characters as King tries to figure out where he will take his characters next. The fourth installment, *Wizard and Glass*, is the longest digression. The novel is framed by present action: Roland and his ka-tet, or band of companions drawn together by destiny, travel along a highway in Kansas on the Path of the Beam. The novel’s bulk, however, is a flashback into Roland’s past and the beginning of his quest. *Wizard and Glass* establishes, both for the reader and for King, who Roland is and why he became that way. By presenting Roland as a boy, and a boy in love for the first time, King discovers the human element of the gunslinger that was absent in the earlier novels, where he appears almost mechanical in his precision and practicality.

None of these first four novels bring Roland, or the reader, any closer physically to the Tower. King claimed in the Afterword to the original *Gunslinger* that he is “never completely sure where [he is] going, and in this story that is even more true than usual” (*Gunslinger* 1982 223). In the Afterword of *The Drawing of the Three*, King reiterates his lack of knowledge about his own series:

Do I really know what the Tower is, and what awaits Roland there (should he reach it, and you must prepare yourself for the very real possibility that he will not be the one to do so)? Yes...and no. All I know is that the tale has called to me again and again over a period of seventeen years. (407)

As noted earlier, admittedly writing into the void allows the author a great deal of creative freedom to make mistakes and change earlier notions. After Eddie Dean’s appearance in the second book, it is clear to the reader that King identifies much more with the young drug addict than with his original hero. In the sixth volume, when King, now a character in his own tale, meets Eddie, he tells him “you’re an okay guy. It’s your pal I don’t much care for. And never did. I think that’s part of the reason I quit on the story” (278). King and Roland both seem to be preparing Eddie to somehow take over the quest if Roland should be unable to finish it. In these early novels, King focuses a great deal of the narration through Eddie’s thoughts and emotions, and Roland constantly tests Eddie’s skills. This identification with Eddie, and his comments regarding Roland’s potentially not reaching the Tower, suggest that King will make Eddie the true hero.

This notion of Eddie becoming the leader of the quest is slowly dispelled, however, as King discovers the true nature of Roland’s quest. There is no way that any character other than Roland could truly reach the Tower. After the fourth book, when Roland’s youth and humanity is

revealed, King stops focalizing through Eddie as he had in the past, and removes him and the other members of the ka-tet from Roland's life in the final installment, when Roland discovers the cyclical nature of his quest. When he discovers at the top of the Tower that he has done it all before, the Voice of the Tower (arguably the voice of King himself) tells Roland that the Tower is a place of death "*because your life has made it so*" (*Dark Tower* 825). As King discovers Roland and the gunslinger's life opens before him, King learns that his quest can only have one fate: Resumption.

### **King Rewriting King**

After King had finished the manuscripts of the final three installments, he returned to *The Gunslinger* to make revisions before their publication. His first edition was an epigraph from Thomas Wolfe's *Look Homeward, Angel*:

...a stone, a leaf, an unfound door; of a leaf, a stone, a door. And of all the forgotten faces. ...

Which of us has known his brother? Which of us has looked into his father's heart? Which of us has not remained forever prison-pent? Which of us is not forever a stranger and alone? ...O lost, and by the wind grieved, ghost, come back again.

(*Gunslinger* 2003)

King will return frequently to Wolfe's stone, leaf and unfound door, making them a key, a rose, and an unfound door. Roland's forgotten faces are of all those that are sacrificed to the Tower, and he is the one who is prison-pent, "forever a stranger and alone," who will "come back again" for all eternity. In *The Dark Tower*, King again quotes Wolfe (with his own alterations) right after Roland has been blown back to the desert to begin again: "O lost!—a stone, a rose, an unfound door; a stone a rose a door" (828).

King's other additions were mostly corrections of inconsistencies, such as correcting the names of towns or minor characters, and in attempting to make Roland appear more human than he did in the original. The most important difference, however, comes on the first page. In the original, King describes Roland as "[walking] stolidly, not hurrying, not loafing" (*Gunslinger* 1982 11), but in the revision, he depicts Roland with a kind of confusion:

The gunslinger had been struck by a momentary dizziness, a kind of yawning sensation that made the entire world seem ephemeral, almost a thing that could be looked through. It passed and, like the world upon whose hide he walked, moved on. He passed the miles stolidly, not hurrying, not loafing. (*Gunslinger* 2003 3)

This dizziness is an echo of the reader's final vision of Roland in the seventh volume. After the door, "the one he always sought, the one he always found," closes behind him, Roland is back to his beginning:

The gunslinger paused for a moment, swaying on his feet. He thought he'd almost passed out. It was the heat of course; the damned heat. There was a wind, but it was dry and brought no relief. ...For a moment he had felt he was somewhere else. In the Tower itself, mayhap. But of course the desert was tricky, and full of mirages. The Dark Tower still lay thousands of wheels ahead. That sense of having climbed many stairs and looked into many rooms where many faces had looked back at him was already fading. (*The Dark Tower* 828).

The final line of the last novel is the same as the first line of the first novel, begging that the reader return to the beginning and continue on, as Roland does, in an eternal cycle.



### **Doubling: Connecting Writing into the Void with the Collapse of Worlds**

The revisions of *The Gunslinger* work primarily to promote consistency and tie the end of the seventh novel to the beginning of the first novel, almost as if they were continuations of one another. These connections supply Roland with the sense, even in the beginning of *The Gunslinger*, that he has just returned from the Tower. This notion is echoed through King's use of twins and doubling. Throughout the series, everything that Roland sees on his quest reminds him of something he has already seen, whether it be the relation of his first ka-tet to his second, the roont (a vernacular form of ruined) twins of the Calla, or the Tower and the Rose in the vacant lot. Eddie Dean is constantly compared to Cuthbert Allgood, Jake Chambers is strong in the touch like Alain Johns, the city of Lud is a post-apocalyptic New York City, and the Calla where the gunslingers save the twins is eerily similar to the Barony of Mejis, where Roland's quest began when he was only a boy. This constant sense that Roland, and the reader, has seen it all before reinforces King's oft-repeated claim that Ka, or fate, is a wheel. For this quest there is never any sense of progression. The same mistakes are repeated eternally; everything has already been done.

In *The Dark Tower*, after Jake and Eddie have both been killed, Susannah has recurring dreams of the two of them in Central Park waiting for her. One wears a hat that says "Merry," the other "Christmas." They hint to her that she is not meant to continue with Roland to the end of the quest, but she does not understand. In her final two dreams, the two hats have become one, bearing the words "Merry Christmas" on it, and Eddie tells Susannah what she must do:

*"You must let him go his course alone," says Eddie. ...*

*"I don't understand," Susannah says, and holds out her stocking cap to them.*

*"Wasn't this yours? Didn't you share it?"*

*“It could be your hat, if you want it,” says Eddie... .*

*“No more twins,” says Jake. “There’s only one hat, do ya not see.” (The Dark Tower 645)*

Susannah leaves Roland’s world, much as she came into it, through a door. This time, however, she joins two people who are dead in a New York where people drive Takuro Spirits and drink Nozz-a-la Cola. This world, Susannah knows, is not the “real” world, it is a kind of Todash, or hallucination, but she chooses it over the Tower, leaving Roland to continue on to his destiny while the characters wait in limbo for him to draw them again and begin the quest anew. The combining of the two hats, the end of twins, suggests that all worlds have been collapsed, that all things are now one.

### **The Collapsing of Worlds and Sources**

In his *Very Short Introduction to Postmodernism*, Christopher Butler asserts that postmodern literature enjoyed the collapsing of distinctions:

All texts were now liberated to swim, with their linguistic or literary or generic companions, in a sea of intertextuality in which previously accepted distinctions between them hardly mattered, and to be seen collectively as forms of playful, disseminatory rhetoric (rather like Derrida’s own lectures, which became freewheeling, disorganized, unfocused, lengthy monologues). (24)

Stephen King’s collapsing of source material and popular culture, which is mimed by the collapsing of worlds present within his novels, follow this freewheeling, swimming form. His literary sources are also all tied to one another in some way, suggesting that all texts truly do “swim...in a sea of intertextuality.” King’s series perhaps draws the most from Arthurian Romance. Roland Deschain is the final descendent of the line of Arthur Eld, the great king of All

World and lord of the White, and the barrels of Roland's revolvers were forged from the metal of the blade of Excalibur. Robin Furth claims in her *Dark Tower Concordance* that

All descendents of Arthur Eld, as well as their gunslinger-knights, are sworn to uphold the Way of the Eld (also known as the Way of Eld) at all costs. The Way of Eld designates the proper conduct of gunslingers. It refers to their rigorous physical and mental training as well as to their sense of honor and duty. According to the Way of Eld, gunslingers must help those in distress if it is within their power to do so. (126)

King also unites Arthur with the Dark Tower, as Arthur and his knights were sworn to protect and preserve the Tower. When Susannah, under the influence of Mia, gives birth to the son conceived by the oracle with whom Roland had also had relations, she names the boy Mordred, calling to mind the son of Arthur who was meant to destroy his father. Roland's son, who is also the son of the Crimson King, dies at his human father's hands, eliminating the last obstacle in the way of the Tower. When Roland breaches the Tower and is thrown back to the desert of *The Gunslinger*, he finds at his side the Horn of Eld, which had been dropped by Cuthbert during the battle in which he was killed when he and Roland were mere boys. In Arthurian romance, the Grail is often figured as a Horn (Loomis 21, 63). With the presence of this horn, King seems to suggest that this particular cycle of Roland's quest will end differently:

*This is your sigul*, whispered the fading voice that bore with it the dusk-sweet scent of roses, the scent of home on a summer evening...*This is your promise that things may be different, Roland—that there may yet be rest. Even salvation. ..If you stand. If you are true.* (The Dark Tower 829)

Roland finds the horn “oddly comforting,” as he resumes his quest, and the slight hope that King suggests seems nothing more than that simple comfort, because Roland will always choose to enter the door at the top of the Tower.

Though elements and themes of Arthurian Romance pervade King’s series, it is Robert Browning’s “Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came” that is cited by the author himself as the primary influence for the work in the Afterword to the original *Gunslinger*, calling it “gorgeous and rich and inexplicable,” and describing his desire to write “a long romantic novel embodying the feel, if not the exact sense” of the poem (Gunslinger 1982 221). The first lines of the poem (“My first thought was, he lied in every word, / That hoary cripple, with malicious eye”) are used at various times in the series to describe many different characters: Walter O’Dim (the Man in Black), Dandelo, and even Roland himself. In the final volume, King writes of his attempt to return to the series after his accident, and cites the importance of the poem once again, this time discussing where to place to poem in his own tale:

Lying on the coffee-table is one that came via FedEx from his office in Bangor just this morning: *The Complete Poetical Works of Robert Browning*. It contains, of course, “Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came,” the narrative poem that lies at the root of King’s long (and trying) story. An idea suddenly occurs to him, and it brings an expression to his face that stops just short of outright laughter. ...”One place for the poem, old boy,” King says, and tosses the book back onto the coffee-table. It’s a big ‘un, and lands with a thud. “One place and one place only.” (The Dark Tower 545)

The poem itself finds its way into the story when Roland and Susannah are trapped by Dandelo, a kind of vampire who feeds off of laughter, strangling his victims to death with jokes. Susannah is in the bathroom when she finds a note from Stephen King that makes her realize that Dandelo

is evil. Attached to the note is a copy of Browning's poem, with stanzas I, II, XIII, XIV, and XVI circled, causing Susannah to exclaim to Roland that "It was this poem that got King going! *It was his inspiration!*" (*The Dark Tower* 693).

The theme that King's work shares most with Browning's poem is a constant sense of flux. There is no stable sense of character in either work. Browning's Roland, like King's, is at once a chivalric quest hero and a lying villain with no sense of morality. Browning's prose, like King's, is characterized by a brokenness and lack of flow that cast a grotesque light over the grail and quest themes of both. Browning's Arthurian world is not the traditional one characterized by light and beauty, but a waste land that never lives up to expectations.

The sense of the Arthurian world turned on its head and replaced by a waste land ties together the grail romances, Browning's grotesque experience, King's multiple worlds, and one of King's other major sources, modernist poet T.S. Eliot. Eliot's poem "The Waste Land," which deals with a world that has "moved on" like Roland's, directly influenced King while writing *The Dark Tower*. After World War I, Eliot and other modernist writers attempted to find a way to write poetry in a world that felt completely destroyed and a culture left in fragments. Eliot's work clings to the past in much the same way as Roland clings to his maniacal need to find the Dark Tower. Robin Furth notes in the introduction to her concordance that "Roland, the isolated individual, is a survivor, but he is no more than a fragment of a larger, lost mosaic. He has no meaning. Like the landscape he travels, his soul has become a wasteland" (7). Roland, then, becomes the physical manifestation of Eliot's poetry, and his quest becomes, for King, the attempt to make sense of the fragments.

Eliot's "The Waste Land" focuses primarily on the protection of ideas and artists, serving as an act of artistic and cultural conservation. King was directly influenced by this poem, titling

his third installment in the series *The Waste Lands*, and subtitling the sections of the novel “Fear in a Handful of Dust” and “A Heap of Broken Images.” In this book, Roland’s new ka-tet is completed with the drawing of Jake back into Mid-World, and the quest begins in earnest for the four travelers. Eliot’s poem appears frequently in the dialogue and inner monologues of the characters, most notably Jake as he is walking through the House on Dutch Hill toward the door through which he will come back to Roland’s world. As he walks, he recites Eliot’s poem to himself as it “[occurs] to him suddenly”:

It was supposed to be about the plight of modern man, who was cut off from all his roots and traditions, but to Jake it suddenly seemed that the man who had written that poem must have seen this house: *I will show you something different from either/Your shadow in the morning striding behind you/Or your shadow at evening rising to meet you;/I will show you...*

“I’ll show you fear in a handful of dust,” Jake muttered, and put his hand on the doorknob. (*The Waste Lands* 195)

Later in the novel, it is again suggested that Eliot must have been present to see the places and things in Roland’s world. In the city of Lud, eerily similar to Eliot’s “Unreal City, / Under the brown fog of a winter dawn” (Eliot “Waste Land” 2297), Susannah quotes Eliot:

“ ‘A heap of broken images, where the sun beats and the dead tree gives no shelter,’”

Susanna murmured, and at these words Eddie felt gooseflesh waltz across the skin of his arms and chest and legs. ...

“A poem by a man who must have seen Lud in his dreams,” she said. (*The Waste Lands* 343)

King uses intertextuality to collapse the worlds with his novel as well as challenge his readers' cultural compartmentalization. Directly quoting both Browning and Eliot allows King at once to demonstrate his knowledge of "the classics" and to revise them by suggesting that *The Dark Tower* and the worlds that King creates lie at the center of previous works. In this way, King's challenge to traditional authority presents an interesting version or simulation of postmodernism in which meaning and grand narratives are not so much questioned as transferred into Stephen King, who lies at the center of everything.

One instance of this notion of King's work at the center of everything can be seen when he picks up on Eliot's use of Tarot cards in "The Waste Land" and applies them to Roland's quest. In *The Gunslinger*, Walter reads Tarot cards for Roland. Before Walter allows Roland to catch him, however, the gunslinger must first sacrifice the boy Jake. When Jake falls and is left hanging on to the side of the pit, King cites Eliot's "drowned Phoenician sailor": "All the chips are on the table. Every card up but one. The boy dangled, a living Tarot card, the Hanged Man, the Phoenician sailor, innocent lost and barely above the wave of a stygian sea" (*Gunslinger* 2003 204). After Roland allows the boy to fall, Walter tells his fortune. The first card that is turned over is The Hanged Man, the card not found in Eliot's poem. The Hanged Man "symbolizes the self-sacrifice of the fertility god who is killed so that is resurrection may restore fertility to land and people" (Eliot "Waste Land" 2297, note 1). Walter tells Roland that "in conjunction with nothing else, it signifies strength, not death. You, gunslinger, are the Hanged Man, plodding ever onward toward your goal" (*Gunslinger* 2003 212-13). The second card is The Sailor: Jake, the sacrifice. Walter turns over the other cards, revealing the other people who will join Roland's quest, and the final three cards are Death ("yet not for" Roland), The Tower, and Life ("But not for" Roland). The Tower is placed "over the Hanged Man, covering it

completely” (*Gunslinger* 2003 214). King, through Walter, suggests even at this early point that Roland is the Tower and that the Tower is Roland. He is at the center of the universe, and everything else, including the poetry of T.S. Eliot and Robert Browning, radiates out from him, influencing and being influenced by him.

King borrows from more than high literary sources. In addition to the grail romances, Browning, and Eliot, he includes references from popular culture. These references occur with the same importance, and no distinction is made between high and low. Blaine, the monorail train that carries the ka-tet over the Waste Lands and engages them in a riddling contest for their lives, imitates John Wayne (“WHAT YOU GOT, LITTLE PILGRIM?”), quotes T.S. Eliot (“IN THE ROOMS THE PEOPLE COME AND GO BUT I DON’T THINK ANY OF THEM ARE TALKING OF MICHELANGELO”), and truly has a mind of his own, despite being a monorail (*The Waste Lands* 376, 380). King takes his epigraphs from such disparate sources as Shakespeare, Thomas Wolfe, The Rolling Stones, and Nine Inch Nails. Another popular seven book series also makes an appearance in the three final volumes. King brings in elements of J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series, incorporating robotic house elves named Dobbie, clearly a knock at Rowling’s harebrained Dobby. Roland and his gang battle the Wolves of the Calla in the fifth volume of the same name. These wolves—which are actually mechanized creatures dressed in long green cloaks and wearing the masks of wolves—wield weapons called “sneetches,” which are golden balls with wings that explode, much like a flying grenade, that bear the inscription ““Sneetch” Harry Potter Model” (*Wolves of the Calla* 683). When Jake picks up one of these sneetches, he wonders to himself “who Harry Potter was. The sneetch’s inventor, more than likely” (*Wolves of the Calla* 683). In the New York that Roland and Eddie will shortly be traveling to it is 1999, the year the first *Harry Potter* novel was published.



An entire study could be done on King's inclusion of sundry pop culture references. The series could almost be said to be a history of American culture, especially of New York and New England culture, from the late 1960s (with Odetta Holmes and her work with the Civil Rights Movement) to the turn of the twenty-first century up to September 11, 2001 (Jake and Father Callahan place "Black Number Thirteen" in a long term storage unit in a terminal under the World Trade Center in 1999). In this study, what is important is the way in which King includes these references beside his other sources, both literary and popular.

King's purpose with this flattening of cultures and sources seems to be to reveal an interconnectedness between previous literature, his own work, and the world of his readers. Characters make claims that Eliot and Browning must have witnessed or at least heard of the events and places of the novels, and therefore *The Dark Tower* becomes, in a way, the impetus for the writing of such literary works as Eliot's "Waste Land" and Browning's "Childe Roland." King creates his own back story or history through which to interpret his influences, using them for his own purposes. This openness of interpretability suggests, as did the notion of writing into the void, that all of King's sources and even his own work are ultimately attempting to tell the same story. Everything is, like Roland's quest, one continuous loop. King the author places himself at the center of this loop as a character, locating all authority and meaning within himself while all other texts and sources orbit around him.

### **King the Character and a New Quest**

After a near fatal accident in 1999, King's vision of the Tower seems to have shifted. Up to this point, the Tower had been a definite destination point for him, but after this he sees his gunslinger and his quest differently. In *Song of Susannah*, the sixth volume, Roland and Eddie meet Stephen King at his house in Bridgton, Maine, in 1977, before the actual publication of *The*

*Gunslinger* but after it has been written. Before they meet King, Roland says “I feel as though we’re approaching the center of everything—the Tower itself, mayhap. It’s as if, after all these years, the quest itself has become the point for me, and the end is frightening” (*Song of Susannah* 266). The center here is not the Tower as Roland thinks of it, or as the reader has thought of it throughout the series, but is the author himself. Roland and Eddie go to King to convince him that he must write the series. They tell him that he must continue and write Roland’s quest all the way to its conclusion, because all of civilization depends upon this story being told and the Tower being upheld. Eddie tells Roland that “all [King] needs to do is write the right story. Because some stories *do* live forever,” and Roland’s quest, though he still is working toward the Tower, also gains a new focus: protecting the writer (*Song of Susannah* 271). In order to do this, they must save him from death in 1999. To do this, Jake sacrifices his life again for Roland, saving King in the process. But King returns the favor, stepping in twice as the *deus ex machina* for his characters. In *Song of Susannah*, he leaves a note and a room key for Jake at a hotel that allows him to get the Wizard’s Glass and save Susannah: “Dad-a-chum, dad-a-chee, not to worry, you’ve got the key. Dad-a-chud, dad-a-ched, see it, Jake! The key is red!” (323). Again, in *The Dark Tower*, King leaves the note for Susannah in Dandelo’s bathroom:

Relax! Here comes the Deus Ex Machina!

...

I’ve left you something in the medicine cabinet, but first

**\*\*THINK ABOUT IT!\*\***

(Hint: Comedy + Tragedy = MAKE BELIEVE) (680-81)

These intrusions of the author as a character that is also writing the story of the novel at the same time that he is interacting with characters in an almost god-like capacity has roots in both

Victorian and postmodern texts. The Victorian narrator as a god-like omniscient figure, such as the hand of Dickens intruding in his novels and acting as a kind of puppet master, is taken one step further by postmodernism with meta-fiction in which the author actually appears as a character and writer, as in *The Dark Tower*.

### **The Postmodern Serial Beyond *The Dark Tower***

Stephen King's *Dark Tower* presents a synthesis of two forms which were previously unconnected: the steady, gradual story-telling and punctuated publication of the Victorian serial and series combined with the intertextuality and questioning of traditional authority that is characteristic of postmodernism. This new form, the Postmodern Serial, is based on the sense of the interconnectedness of everything, be it literature, popular culture, film, or history, with no hierarchy of values or sources and no distinction between high and low reference.

The combination of forms in *The Dark Tower* suggests that in order to successfully merge serialization with postmodernism, the author must somehow ironize both forms. In his Author's Note at the end of volume seven, King addresses his readers one final time:

It was *all* about reaching the Tower, you see—mine as well as Roland's—and that has finally been accomplished. You may not like what Roland found at the top, but that's a different matter entirely. And don't write me angry letters about it, either, because I won't answer them. There's nothing left to say on the subject. ...it's the *right* ending. The *only* ending, in fact. (*The Dark Tower* 844)

By denying a traditional end and instead giving a never-ending cycle, King adopts the postmodern emphasis on the ability of the receiver to make meaning. However, by writing himself into the series as a character and placing all meaning within himself it would seem that King denies the receiver's ability to create this meaning. In this way, King ironizes both

serialization and postmodernism: he seems to be attempting to educate himself out of the nineteenth-century sense of the narrator as God at the same time that he relocates all meaning into himself as the writer. By rewriting and ironizing both, King takes each one step beyond their pre-conceived limits, again placing himself at the end of literary history as the final point to which it all led, the summation of everything.

In the final Author's Note, King claimed that "[his] idea was to use the Dark Tower stories as a kind of summation, a way of unifying as many of [his] previous stories as possible beneath the arch of some *über*-tale. [He] never meant that to be pretentious (and [he hopes] it isn't), but only as a way of showing how life influences art (and vice-versa)" (*The Dark Tower* 843-4). *The Dark Tower* is a summation not only of his own works, but an attempt to "sum up" King's literary predecessors as well. This summative quality is, for King, the necessary result of writing into the void and the collapsing of worlds and sources. If the Postmodern Serial is based on these two characteristics, then it must somehow make sense—or at least acknowledge a refusal to do so—of the collapse and the writing without knowing. By combining serialization and postmodernism, *The Dark Tower* suggests that the distinctions between forms and genres are fluid and can ultimately be revised and redefined. King's work has, intentionally or unintentionally, opened the door for new combinations of previously distinct forms.

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